

The Icon, History, Symbolism and Meaning

Source : Dormition of the Theotokos Monastery, Rives Junction, Mich.

A Monastic Journal, Winter, 2003 Vol. 16 #2

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THE ICON -- HISTORY, SYMBOLISM AND MEANING

The Orthodox Church is inconceivable without icons, lit candles and burning incense. The Orthodox Church is a Church of tradition, and the presence and use of icons in the Orthodox Church is a reflection of this tradition.

The word **ICON** comes from the Greek word **EIKONA**, meaning image. In its broadest sense an icon is any representation of a sacred personage, produced in many media and sizes. In the narrower sense it refers to a devotional painted wooden panel.

The icon is the result of the synthesis of three different cultures: Greek, Roman and Christian. The technique of Byzantine art has traveled beyond the frontiers of the Empire, having a profound influence on the development of art especially in the Slavic nations.

Christian art first appeared in the catacombs which were underground rock-cut burial places widely spread up to the 6th Century. Although the catacombs were not the prerogative of any particular religious group and were widely spread geographically, they are commonly associated with Christianity. The largest body of catacombs was discovered in Rome. Starting with the 3rd Century Roman Christians buried their dead in extramural subterranean tombs composed of networks of corridors and cubicles of various sizes. Some of the tombs were decorated with a painted or carved inscription identifying the occupant, while other images included scenes from the Old Testament. The images in the catacombs are simple, made with few brush strokes and a narrow range of colors. Subjects range from Christ carrying a lamb to three young men praising God from the fiery furnace, to the raising of Lazarus, to the Eucharistic meal. During the time when Christianity became tolerated, the decorations of the catacombs became quite elaborate. The Roman catacombs ceased to be used for burial in the 6th Century.

The art of the catacombs was a teaching, art. Pagan symbols that already existed were used by Christians along with new ones that they invented. For example: the ship represented the Church and also represented prosperity, while the peacock, the dove, and the palm tree were representations of Paradise. The adoration of the Wise Men represented the admission of pagans to the faith, and the multiplication of breads was the symbol of the Eucharistic banquet; the vine symbolized the mystery of God's grace for the baptized. What could not be openly expressed by Christians, because of the fears of persecution, was portrayed in a symbolic language, a secret code used by believers in a hostile world: This secret symbolism of the images in

the catacombs was progressively taught to the catechumens. The catacombs bear witness that wherever Christians gathered, they created a visual environment to remind them of the Kingdom of God and help them pray.

The most wide spread symbol used, that appeared in the 2nd Century is the fish. A sign used in antiquity to represent fecundity and later, in Roman times, eroticism, the fish became a condensed form of the Creed: the word fish in Greek is composed of five letters forming an acrostic abbreviating the dictum: *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*; translated into English, it means: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*.

When Christianity was no longer a forbidden religion, Christian art left the catacombs along with the pagan symbols and moved rapidly and vigorously into creating its own art, its own form of expression. After the victory of Emperor Constantine over Maxentius in 312, Christianity is recognized as a state religion. With emperors now joining Christianity, it led to massive conversions. Constantine the Great, imitated by many others, commanded the construction of many beautifully designed and decorated churches. Indifferent to art until now, the Church becomes the strongest propagator of artistic expression, both in architecture and in image representations. Having great wealth coming from the state and also from the princes themselves, the Church has the opportunity to create and develop a separate form of art: Christian art.

In the year 330 Constantinople becomes the imperial capital. In the centuries that follow it was to become the holy city that harmonized the profane with the sacred. In the 4th Century we find that Christ is no longer portrayed as a philosopher, but as the Master of the Universe; a new and strong bond is now being formed between State and Church, where Christ is the Sovereign of the Christian world and the Emperor is His representative on earth.

Byzantium was the cross road between East and West, and included the entire Mediterranean basin. It had its capital at Constantinople, the meeting point of Europe and Asia. Though well attached to the political and social institutions of the Later Roman Empire, it evolved the new ecumenical religion -- Christianity -- spoke the Greek language and adopted Greek education. Justinian I (527-565), the last of the great Roman emperors, wanted to achieve political and religious unity in the Empire. His reign was called "The Golden Age." An age of high spirituality and artistic genius.

The works of Byzantine art are the products of deeply held beliefs and piety, created for the most part by anonymous artists, reflecting the decorum of the Kingdom of Heaven. Through their structure and unchangeable principles, they give tangible form to the conception of the divine as received by the Orthodox doctrine. Byzantine artists were not simple copyists of the past; they had their own traditions, values and ideals. They lived in an environment that had political and institutional continuity with the past, and while the Western European states established themselves on the ruins of the Roman Empire, Byzantium was itself the Roman Empire. Also, the Byzantine society and culture was linked to ancient Greece. Byzantine language was closest to classical and post-classical Greek. The literature of classical Greece, of the Hellenistic world, and that of the Fathers of the Church, was accessible to the Byzantines, and through its literature, they absorbed the ideas and the values

it expressed.

The series of the works of art in Byzantium started with great masterpieces, such as the churches of Saint Sophia, Saint Irene and Saints Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, dating from the middle of the 6th Century, and attributed to the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, while on the other side of the Mediterranean basin, in Ravenna, Italy we find the most impressive series of mural mosaics dating from the 5th and 6th Centuries; the mosaics dating from the 5th Century are found in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, a Roman Empress, and the Orthodox Baptistery; the mosaics in the church of Saint Appollinaris the New, Saint Vitale, and Saint Appollinaris in Classe, as well as the Baptisterium of the Arians, date from the 6th Century, with some additions from the 7th.

The influence of the Byzantine art is found also in the Eastern parts of the Empire, as far as Egypt. In the monastery of St. Catherine, in the desert of Sinai, we find the same style of mosaic decorations as in the other corners of the Empire. There is also a series of icons painted on wood in encaustic (a method using melted wax in which coloring pigments are mixed) that have been preserved in Sinai, some of them also found now in the Kiev Museum and the church of Santa Maria Nova (Saint Mary the New) in Rome. These are certainly the images that shed light on the origins of the paintings on wood that will develop extensively in the 9th Century and beyond. It is uncertain that these icons were painted in Sinai; it is more likely that they were brought there and the fact that they survived is due to the remote location of St. Catherine's Monastery and also to the respect that the Muslims have for the monastery, therefore sparing it destruction. From Byzantium this kind of pictorial art will travel also to what is known today as Russia.

By the 7th Century Egypt and Syria do not belong anymore to the Empire. We are entering now the dark ages of the Byzantine era, a period that will last almost two centuries: from the time of the Emperor Heraclius (610 to 641) to Emperor Justinian II (685 to 711), a period of fierce wars against Islam, the Slavs and the Bulgarians.

Two iconoclastic periods mark the history and life of the Church. The first period of condemnation of icons as symbols of idolatry started with the reign of Emperor Leo III, or Leo Isaurian (717-741). Rejecting any representation of Christ and His saints, Emperor Leo III felt that such images should not be objects of veneration. The Council of 754 which convened in Hieria, near Constantinople, agreed to a formal condemnation of the cult. It denied that the mystery of Christ included both His divinity and humanity. During this time, painting as an art, was never completely abandoned, with the exception of sacred art. Sacred art has been destroyed and desecrated by the iconoclasts, and profane art has been destroyed and desecrated by their adversaries. Two successors to the throne of Leo III, Constantine (780-797) and Irene (797-802), guided by Patriarch Tarasius, convened the Second Council that took place in Nicea, in 787 -- more precisely, the Seventh Ecumenical Council -- where the iconophiles vehemently defended the cult of the icons and their victory prompted the restoration of the cult.

The Church was thrown once again into disarray with the coming to the

throne of Emperor Leo the Armenian (813-820), by giving rise to the second wave of war against the holy images. Leo was succeeded by Michael Amorian and Michael was succeeded by Theophilus (829-842). With the help of Patriarch Antony I Kassymatas he restored iconoclasm by prohibiting all painted images, and any aid to iconodules. After his death in 842 in Constantinople, his wife Theodora served as regent for their son Michael III. She was a devout iconophile, faithfully venerating icons despite the disapproval of her late husband. She managed to secure the release from prison of painter Lazarus, and in 843 she consented to the restoration of the icons. She is quoted to say: *"If for love's sake, anyone does not kiss and venerate these images in a relative manner, not worshiping them as gods but as images of their archetypes, let him be anathema!"* For her role in the triumph of Orthodoxy she is commemorated on March 11 (the First Sunday of Great Lent in 843). To this day, the First Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to the restoration of the holy icons by Emperor Michael III and his mother Theodora, and the triumph over all heresies of Orthodoxy.

The theologian who defended the use of icons in Christian worship was St. John of Damascus. In his treatise "On the Divine Images" he writes: *"If we've made an image of the invisible God, we would certainly be in error... but we do not do anything of the kind; we do not err, in fact we make the image of God incarnate Who appeared on earth in the flesh, Who in His ineffable goodness, lived with men and assumed the nature, the volume and the color the flesh."*

The return to the art of sacred images, after a long and difficult struggle, meant the return to old practices; the images of Christ and of all the saints are now officially proclaimed by the victorious Church as having divine powers and their contemplation as necessary for our salvation. Charged by this new religious function, all paintings with a religious subject placed in the shade all other art representations.

After 843, Cappadocia became an important center for sacred art. The region, developed in the 4th Century by St. Basil as a center for monastic life, blossomed with hundreds of churches. Many of them were rediscovered at the beginning of the 20th Century. These churches present a great variety of themes and styles, the majority of them dating from the 11th and 12th Centuries. Not only did art flourish during this time, but theology as well. Unfortunately, the Crusaders' invasion provoked by the Venetians in 1204, as well as the plundering of Constantinople, depleted the Byzantine Empire of its material resources and its moral strength. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, and the invasion of the Balkans, marks the end of a most glorious and prestigious epoch in history. The Turks, in their wake, transformed the most beautiful churches into mosques.

A second period in the development of Byzantine art is the one after the 9th Century. At this time, we find a new and different type of Byzantine painting style that is not as close to the art that is developing in the other parts of the world. The gap between East and West and Middle East is starting to widen. Byzantine influence is starting to decrease.

The mural mosaics are without any doubt, the most important and the peak of Byzantine art of all ages. A new art form is developing however, and that is

the art of the fresco -- the fresco is a mural painting, on a specially prepared plaster material. A totally different technique than the mosaic, the fresco allowed the artist more flexibility and more creative detailing. Just as mosaic, the fresco was used mostly to decorate the churches. The most archaic and extensive fresco of such kind is found in Cappadocia. Others, of more rustic themes are found in Greece, Cyprus, Serbia, Russia, even Bulgaria. Many are still preserved also in Constantinople.

Along with the frescos, beginning with the 9th Century we find also that the Byzantine piety is influencing greatly the development of small scale pieces, icons painted on wood. Icon shops start to exist now, mostly in the monasteries.

In St. John of Damascus' work we find also his argument in favor of painted icons: *"Since the invisible One became visible by taking on flesh, you can fashion the image of Him whom you saw. Since He who has neither body nor form nor quantity nor quality, Who goes beyond all grandeur by the excellence of His nature, He, being of divine nature, took on the condition of slave and reduced himself to quantity and quality by clothing himself in human features. Therefore paint on wood and present for contemplation Him who desired to become visible."*

Iconography of the icon:

As we have seen so far, in all ages and in all cultures the icon is not nearly a piece of art, but an aid to worship, and an instrument for the transmission of Christian tradition and faith. The Holy Spirit speaks to men through icons. Anywhere an icon is placed (except maybe in a museum) a place of worship and prayer is set, because the icon is not an end in itself, but a window through which we look with our physical eyes at the Kingdom of Heaven and the realm of spiritual experience. It is important to remember thus that the icon is concerned only with the sacred; the icon is theology in mages and color. In the words of L. Ouspensky Christianity is the Word of --God expressed in images: *"Christianity is the revelation not only of the Word of God but also of the Image of God, in which His Likeness is revealed. This godlike image is the distinctive feature of the New Testament, being the visible witness of the deification of man. The ways of iconography, as means of expressing what regards the Deity are here the same as the ways of theology. The task of both alike is to express that which cannot be expressed by human means, since such _expression will always be imperfect and insufficient. There are no words, nor colors nor lines, which could represent the kingdom of God as we represent and describe our world. Both theology and iconography are faced with a problem which is absolutely insoluble -- to express by means belonging to the created world that which is infinitely above the creature. On this plane there are no successes, for the subject itself is beyond comprehension and no matter how lofty in content and beautiful an icon may be it cannot be perfect, just as no word image can be perfect. In this case, both theology and iconography are always a failure; for this value results from the fact that both theology and iconography reach the limit of human possibilities and prove insufficient. Therefore the methods used by iconography for pointing to the Kingdom of God can only be figurative, symbolical, like the language of the parables in the Holy Scripture"*

(L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of icons*, SVS Press, 1989, pp 48-49).

For the Orthodox Christian the icon is not an aesthetic object, or an object of study; it is "living art" if we can call it such. It is meant to transfigure and to inspire the person to prayer and contemplation. Leonid Ouspensky says: *"Just as the teaching concerning the purpose of Christian life -- the deification of man -- continues to exist, so the dogmatic teaching concerning the icon continues to exist and live in the Divine services of the Orthodox Church.... For an Orthodox man of our times an icon, whether ancient or modern, is not an object of aesthetic admiration"* (L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky, *The Meaning of icons*, SVS Press, 1989, pp 49).

The First Icon

The first icon, the **MANDYLION** or The Holy Napkin, sometimes called "Made without hands" is said not only to have been an authentic likeness of Christ, but one which Christ Himself willingly produced. It was thus often cited both as proof of the reality of His Incarnation -- as it had been in contact with His body -- and as justification for the iconophile position that Christ Himself has endorsed the making of His image.

The existence of The Holy Napkin is first mentioned in the 6th Century. According to one story, Abgar V the Black, king of Edessa (capital of the Turkish province of Oshroene, important Christian and commercial center of the Islamic world until the 13th Century) had fallen ill and begged Christ to come and cure him. Instead of going to visit Abgar, Christ sent him a towel that He had pressed against His face and that retained the impression of His features. Upon receiving the towel the King was miraculously cured. The image was lost and then rediscovered and it remained in Edesa. In the year 944 Edesa was sieged and the Holy Napkin was demanded as a condition for withdrawal. It was then carried in procession to Constantinople, where it was placed in the Sultan's chapel in the Great Palace. The event is celebrated annually on August 16. Later it is said to have been purchased by King Louis IX of France, in 1247, and taken to Paris and placed in St. Chapelle. It disappeared during the French Revolution.

The features of Christ's face on the Holy Napkin are those of the Pantocrator. It is not a bust because it only shows the head and part of the neck; no shoulders are seen. The face is painted as though it is imprinted on a horizontal fringed strip of white cloth, hence the name "napkin." The earliest surviving example is said to date from the 10th Century and it is at St. Catherine Monastery in Sinai. This icon has no fixed place in the decoration of a church.

The image of the Holy Napkin was also known in the West under the name of The Veil of Veronica. The Veronica story is similar to that of King Abgar: Veronica was a woman who comforted Jesus as He was bearing the cross on the way to Golgotha. She offered Him a piece of cloth to wipe the blood and sweat off His face; later she found that she received a 'miraculous image. A building along Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem associated with Veronica is today the home of a community of sisters called "The Little Sisters of Jesus."

St. Luke, First painter of the Virgin Mary

Luke's biography does not contain abundant miracles and dangerous travels.

He is presented as a well-educated man, who in Greece and Egypt studied disciplines such as grammar, rhetoric, poetry, ethics and logic. He was a physician and a painter, who died peacefully in Achaia (a late Roman province embracing the Peloponnesus and central Greece, with the capital in Corinth). His relics are said to have been transferred to Constantinople by St. Artemis under the reign of Constantine II.

Legend has it that St. Luke was the first artist to paint the portrait of the Virgin Mary. The monasteries of Hodegon and Soumela claim that the icons of the Virgin Mary in their possession are Luke's paintings. Hodegon Monastery is located in Constantinople close to Hagia Sophia. It was founded the 5th Century by the Empress Pulcheria to house precious relics, which later included the Virgin Hodegetria. Soumela monastery is located on the face of a cliff on the western slopes of Mt. Melas in Asia Minor. The mastery was dedicated to the Virgin; Its origins date back to the 4th Century and its beginnings are attributed to two Athenian monks, Barnabas and Sophronios, who supposedly discovered in a cave at Soumela an icon of the Virgin painted by Luke. In the 20th Century the monastery was abandoned.

Although portrayed as white haired in the 6th Century Cambridge Gospels, St. Luke appears in most Byzantine portraits as a young man with brown, curly hair, hollow cheeks, and a wispy beard. He is usually shown writing in front of a desk. Occasionally he is accompanied by Paul who supposedly inspired his Gospel; more often he is accompanied by his patron, Theophilus. St. Luke's feast day is on October 18. He is the author of the 3^d Gospel, and the Book of Acts, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Prototype, Symbolism, and Techniques

Having looked at the history, development and representation of iconographic images around the world and through the centuries, we need to look also at the qualities of an icon, the prototype, symbolism, and technique.

Along with the Holy Scripture, the icon is a tool for the transmission of Christian tradition and faith. The Holy Spirit speaks to us through the use of images, images that are complementing the written words of the Scripture. It follows then that icons are educational and worshiping aids. This is why it is important to mention that the faith of the person who prays is above the aesthetic qualities of an icon. The icon has as its purpose to transport us into the realm of spiritual experience, to go beyond our material world, to show us the greatness and perfection of the divine reality that is invisible to us.

The icon is not meant to be a sentimental piece. There is no sentimentality or drama in an icon. An icon represents mostly biblical events and biblical characters. The faces of those depicted in an icon are always devoid of their feelings, suggestive only of virtues such as: purity, patience, forgiveness, compassion and love. For example, the icon of the Crucifixion does not show the physical pain Christ suffered on the Cross, but what led Him to the Cross: the voluntary action of giving His life for us.

Icons are also silent. A close observation indicates that the mouths of the characters depicted are never open; there are no symbols that can indicate sound. There is perfect silence in the icon and this stillness and silence creates, both in the church and in the home an atmosphere of prayer and contemplation. The silence of an icon is a silence that speaks, it is the silence

of Christ on the Cross, the silence of the Virgin, the silence of the Transfiguration, the silence of the Resurrection.

Icons are not three-dimensional. Perspective in the icon does not exist. The attempt is made to suggest depth, but the frontal plane is never abandoned, because the icon is not a representation of our conscious world, but an attempt to suggest the beauty of the Kingdom of God. Natural objects are therefore rendered in a vivid but symbolic, sometimes an abstract manner, because spiritual reality cannot be represented in images, except through the use of symbols. As an example, an icon of the Baptism of the Lord depicts Christ as a young man, even though He was a fully matured man at the time of His baptism in the Jordan. The meaning is that through baptism we enter a new life. Also in this icon (mosaic) of the Baptism we see an old man sitting opposite John. He represents the Old Jordan River. The Holy Spirit descending upon Christ is depicted as a white dove.

Prototype

Although the iconography is not an artistic creation and can be qualified more as reproduction, it is not simple copying of work done by others. The iconographer uses prototypes but the iconographer's individual spirituality is present in the creation of every icon. Leonid Ouspensky remarked that: *"... the personal (in iconography) is much more subtle than in the other arts and so often escapes superficial observation.... although icons are remarkably alike, we never find two absolutely identical."*

Another quote, this time from Thomas Merton explains the icon as an act of witness: *"What one sees in prayer before an icon is not an external representation of a historical person but an interior presence in light, which is the glory of the transfigured Christ, the experience of which is transmitted in faith from generation to generation..."*

Color Symbolism

In iconography there are two distinct categories of colors. First there is white, red, green and blue, used to express life, purity, peace and goodness. The second category of colors is black, brown, grey and yellow, and they are used to express danger and impurity. Christian beliefs follow the thought of Dionysus the Aeropagite who distinguishes three types of symbols: noble, middle and base.

What do colors represent in iconography?

White: is the color that represents eternal life and purity.

Blue: represents celestial beings, God's dwelling place, the sky.

Red: symbolizes activity. In Hebrew thought, red represents life. We find it mentioned in several books of the Old Testament: in the Second Book of Samuel, Saul dressed the daughters of Israel in red garments: *"O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with luxury..."* (2 Samuel 1:24). In Proverbs we find that the perfect wife wears red, in the book of Jeremiah, Jerusalem beautifies herself in a red garment. The martyr's clothes are red, the clothing of the seraphims are red also. Red is also the color that depicts health, fire and the Last Judgment.

Purple: purple is the symbol of royalty, wealth, power, and priestly dignity. In the book of Daniel we learn that the king dressed himself in purple, and in the Psalms it is mentioned that the king and the queen are robed in purple.

Green: in the Holy Scriptures, green represents nature and vegetation, and it is thus representative of growth and fertility. It is mentioned in the Song of Songs and the Book of Jeremiah. In iconography it is used for the robes of martyrs and prophets.

Brown: represents density and lack of radiance. Brown is composed of red, blue, green and black, and it is used to depict soil, rocks and buildings. It is also used as a symbol of poverty and renunciation for the dark garments of monks and ascetics.

Black: represents absence of life; it symbolizes a void. It is the opposite of white. While white represents the fullness of life, black represents the lack of it. Monks and Great Schema monks wear black garments, as a symbol of their renunciation of all that is material.

Yellow: representing sadness is used in the icon of the Savior being placed in the tomb. In Deuteronomy it is mentioned as a sign of misfortune, bad harvest and blight.

Creation of an Icon

In iconography an icon is not painted, but written. The process of writing an icon is long and tedious. Many hours, weeks, sometimes months are spent in the creation of an icon, depending of course on the size and complexity of it. A Russian monk remarked once that *"...icons are not civil paintings. They are not for museums. They are not decorations. They are a reflection of God that has become man. Icons carry the real feeling and teachings of Orthodoxy."*

The iconographer does not have the right to change an icon just to be different and creative. As we mentioned earlier, the creation of an icon is not the painter's own work. He is more like a co-author. In the Painter's Manual, preserved on Mount Athos, the master advises him who aspires to become an icon painter to pray before the icon of Christ and that of the Mother of God, because the art of painting comes from God, who alone can guide the painter's hand to give form to the mysteries of God.

Preparation to work on an icon is similar to the preparation for going to church: with prayers and fasting. Painting an icon is a liturgical work. Preparing to paint an icon is like preparing for Liturgy. Always start with prayer. The following is the iconographer's prayer: *"O Divine Lord of all that exists, You have illumined the Apostle and Evangelist Luke with Your Most Holy Spirit, thereby enabling him to represent the most Holy Mother, the one who held You in her arms and said: 'the Grace of Him Who has been born of me is spread throughout the world. Enlighten and direct our souls, our hearts and our spirits. Guide the hands of your unworthy servant, so that we may worthily and perfectly portray your icon, that of Your Holy Mother and of all the saints, for the glory and adornment of Your Holy Church. Forgive our sins and the sins of those who will venerate these icons, and who, standing devoutly before them, give homage those they represent. Protect them from all evil and instruct them with good counsel. This we ask through the prayers of the Most Holy Theotokos, the Apostle Luke, and all the saints, now and ever and unto ages of ages."*

The materials used to create an icon are of several kinds. The most widely used is wood. The wood has to be hard and non-resinous, such as birch, lime or cypress. In most wood panels two wedges of hard wood are inserted

horizontally in the back to prevent warping. The surface of the wood panel is then covered with a sheet of linen that is glued to the wood and on top of it are applied many layers of gesso. (Gesso is a special mixture of plaster and glue that when it hardens it is very strong.) In general seven layers of gesso are applied, and each layer is sanded after it has dried. Because the drying process can take a while, it may take a week or more to prepare the surface of one icon before painting can begin. The final sanding is very important; the surface must remain silky smooth.

The next step is that of tracing on paper the drawing of the prototype that will be used. Once this is done, the drawing is transferred to the icon board with the aid of carbon paper.

The drawing is now on the board, and with what is called a stylus, the contours of the drawing are etched lightly onto the surface of the board. This is done so that the contours do not disappear under the different layers of paint that will be successively applied. If the surface on which the icon will be painted does not have gesso and the contours of the drawing cannot be etched onto it, then the contours are run over with a dark paint, so that they can be seen under the many layers that will be put over.

What follows is the application of the gold leaf. Gold leaf must be applied before anything else. To apply the gold leaf, the area that is to receive the gold leaf is covered with a thin layer of special glue, over which the gold leaf is carefully applied. There are different kinds of gold leaf, the most widely used is 23k gold, but there are also 22k, 18k and 14k gold leaf, and there is of course also gold paint that some may use for economic reasons.

Once the gold leaf is done, the work proper on the icon begins. Contrary to what may be taught in art schools, the painting on the icon is built from bottom up, starting with dark colors and working up to very light colors. In general there are seven layers of paint. After the base layer has been applied, the outlines are redrawn and the subsequent layers are what are called highlights. When the icon is finished, the inscriptions are added and then it is left to dry. Depending on the medium used, drying time can take up to a couple months. After the icon is dry, a fine layer of varnish or oil is applied to the surface. If the icon is painted in acrylic, then the varnish is brushed on the icon and is left to dry, creating a fairly resistant surface. If the painting medium is egg tempera, then boiled linseed oil is applied to the surface and left to penetrate the painted surface and the wood, it too creating a protective coating on the face of the icon and giving it brightness and depth.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God was moving upon the face of the waters. And God said: "Let there be light" and there was light. In these three verses of the Book of Genesis are reflected both the beginning and the end of the making of the icon. Here we have the spiritual meaning of icon writing: the process of writing an icon, as the movement from being without form to Being of Light; Light means the light of life. The icon develops in the hands of the iconographer from a pure white surface on which there is no form to the general outline of the image of man to a full transfigured figure with a name written on the icon.

The whole process of creation is repeated in each icon: from shadow toward light, adding layer after layer of paint and lines, and from a face darkened to the Face transfigured, transformed, the Face of a holy figure resembling God. Man is the crown of God's creation and He revealed Himself, made Himself known by taking the form of man in the Incarnation of His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The Word. *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God"* (John 1:1). The concept of the word refers not only to the gift of speech, thinking, but also to the gift of hearing and sight. Therefore theology can be expressed not only by the word as in the Holy Scripture but also in sound as in sacred music and in image as in holy icons.

We may say that iconography is theology through God the Word as Image, therefore, the icon is regarded as a form of Christian doctrine. It is the Word of God, the Holy Scripture, in color.

The icons displayed in the church are more than attractive pieces of art, or decorative items; they are not even considered religious art, but because icons do present religious subjects they can be classified as religious art. In fact an icon is a link between the eternal and the temporal aiding the worshiper in his own pilgrimage through this earthly life.

The role of icons in the home of every believer is not to be taken lightly. Icons in the home are an extension of the presence of the liturgical mystery which we experience in church. The icon is an integral part of our worship life style.

The spiritual meaning of the icon

Humanity simultaneously moves towards self-destruction while yearning for restoration or more specifically salvation. While evil still remains a reality infecting man's way of living, the icon points to a new mode of existence. The person depicted in the icon is a new person who regardless of sex is a reflection of the New Man Jesus Christ. Through the incarnation the invisible became visible and the undepictable became perceptible and therefore depictable. By taking on human nature the Son of God opens the way for all mankind to be renewed. By taking on human nature the Son of God reveals the true identity of every man as being created in the image and likeness of God. The icon, therefore, depicts each person as a new being who has been restored to God's image and likeness. For this the icon is able to become an object evoking contemplation and prayer from the one who views it. Because of this, Orthodox iconography can only be properly appreciated in the context of communal prayer which provides the basis for its content and form. Iconography is an art that springs from the liturgical celebration of the new covenant, The Eucharist established between God and man through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ who says: *"Behold I make all things new"* (2Cor. 5:17).

The material used for the icons: wood, paint, stone, fabric, glass, metal, elements of the created world, are brought into the reality of the church and like every person of the community undergo a transformation. The transformation of the matter takes place at the same time with the transfiguration and divinization of man. Why is the mystery of the incarnation so great and so important for us to understand: Through His incarnation God has taken all the elements of this earth in his body as we have them in ours;

by His suffering, death and Resurrection He has purified them and made them anew. By His ascension He has taken them into heaven. In the icon we see what will be in the future by what is already here present. History and eschatology are brought together. Everything is depicted as existing beyond time and space. Everything in the icon is on one single plane, figures are long and thin, the center of gravity is upwards and not downwards. The icon is able to witness to the liberation of what is evil and oppressing in this world and reveals human beings as created in the image and likeness of God. This tells us that man has the capacity to know and change creation, because man, like God is able to love. Through love man establishes relationships with other persons and things. In fact man has been entrusted with caring for the life of creation. The idea can be further enhanced by what St. Maximos the confessor says about the cosmological Liturgy, how everything and everyone is sanctified by the act of the Eucharist. When the liturgy is served by the priest and the people in the temple, there is an angelic Liturgy taking place as the priest asks that the angels simultaneously be present and enter the Holy of Holies together. Then there is the Liturgy taking place on the altar of each of the faithful's hearts. According to St. Maximos the whole nature, birds, trees and animals celebrate together and rejoice in this celebration. By this the paradisiac harmony is accomplished, so that all things may remain and grow in God.

The beauty, harmony, unity and joy of life -- as God has intended it for us -- is disrupted by ugliness, division, alienation, misery and death. Through sin we embark on a course of self-destruction therefore communication with God is interrupted. In such a state man begins a process of self-preservation, misusing everyone and everything including God as St. Paul says in the epistle to the Romans: *"For I have already charged that all man both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin as it is written: None is righteous, no, no one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong, no one does good not even me. Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know, there is no fear of God before their eyes"*(3:918).

If the icon is to be a means of contemplation and prayer the one standing in front of it must be willing to enter a process of repentance which can be painful. Standing before the icon and seeing it for what it is, makes us realize the state of brokenness we are in and our alienation from God. Contemplating the icon requires repentance which is a conversion from that self-destruction to life. If we can contemplate the icon in silence we will enter a state of sorrow and joy. Sorrow for we realize the poor state of our spiritual life and the need for change. As we establish a relationship with the icon then we perceive with our minds and senses how the inner light of the icon exposes the inner darkness of our souls and encourages us to enter that light. Once we come to this understanding we enter the joy of the Resurrection that comes to us when we no longer live for ourselves but are willing and ready to give up our lives for our neighbor, we are ready to say with St. Paul: *"...It is no longer I who live but, Christ lives in me"*(Gal. 2:20).

In the presence of a good icon we move from contemplation to prayer. In fact it is said that a good icon is one that inspires prayer. Prayer requires asceticism. Prayerful asceticism becomes a healing process in which whatever has estranged us from God is transformed into becoming a means of communion with God. The mind, soul, heart, body and will of the person who prays becomes still, attentive, attuned, and peaceful, constantly receptive to the presence of God.

As we pray before an icon we enter in communion with the icon's prototype. This becomes the fulfillment of Christ's prayer: *"so that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in us..."* (Jn 17:21). St. Isaac the Syrian describes the person who prays as one who possesses uncontainable love and intense compassion. Such a person's heart is aflame for all creation, for man, birds, animals, demons and all creatures. The icon and the one who enters the reality depicted in the icon witness to the eradication of evil which has infected man's achievements. To the ascetic who prays the icon communicates the meaning of life. Matter and Spirit, heaven and earth, are both united in the icon and in the one who has entered the reality it communicates. Already in the present they begin to manifest the future of creation when God will be all in all.

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